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Israel: The Question Here Is Why Spy?

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A few months ago a senior official of the Mossad, Israel's central intelligence agency, told friends, "We are able to obtain 95% of the information we need from the United States openly. Why should we risk such a relationship for the other 5%?" Why indeed?

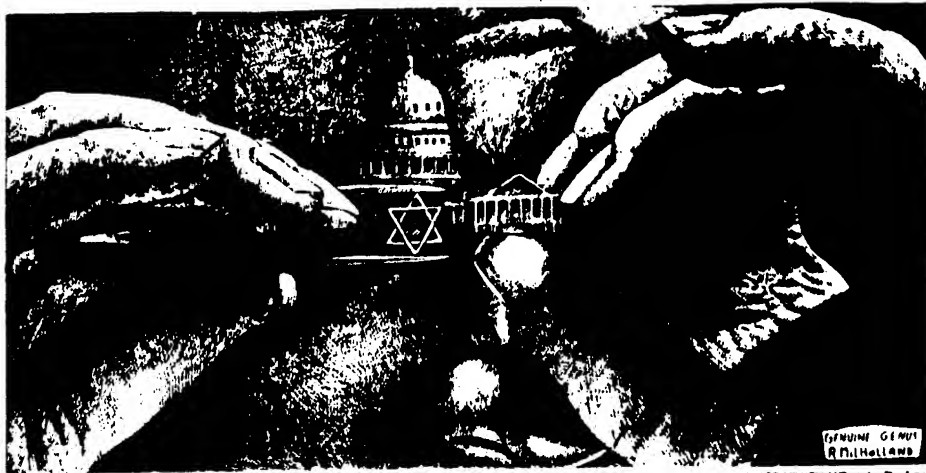
The disclosure that a U.S. citizen, Jonathan J. Pollard, had been charged with spying for Israel sent tremors through official Washington last week, causing shock or disbelief among Israel's friends and supporters. "We expect this sort of thing from our adversaries, not our friends," said one of Israel's staunchest congressional allies. He predicts this incident could "haunt" U.S.-Israeli relations for years to come.

A number of past and present Administration officials consider the alleged Israeli actions particularly egregious in light of the degree of intimate cooperation between the two countries' intelligence communities. "The intelligence sharing we conduct with Israel is among the best we have in the world," says one State Department insider. A former U.S. intelligence official agrees; "The areas not shared are marginal," he says.

Even the Israelis admit that Pollard's actions, if proven, violate a quarter-century "gentleman's agreement" between the United States and Israel not to engage

in covert activities against each other. U.S. officials insist they have scrupulously kept their end of the bargain. One Reagan appointee, on first joining the government, spent much time reviewing U.S. intelligence procedures regarding Israel. He found there were no covert activities, no surveillance and, to his surprise, no monitoring of Israeli communications from Washington.

Worse than a simple breach of trust, the Pollard affair could, in the view of several U.S. officials, undercut the positive trend in intelligence cooperation that has accelerated under the Reagan Administration. The U.S. intelligence community, led by CIA Director William J. Casey, reluctantly acceded to the Administration's policy guidelines that, in effect, call for a generous and open relationship with Israel—across the board. The lone holdout, the Defense Department under Caspar W. Weinberger, had to be continually prodded by the White House. Now Israel supporters within the Administration fear slippage. "Their troubles with the Pentagon could become a model for the rest of the government," says one official.



Another Administration official underscores that attitude: "There's a great deal of resentment in the intelligence community. People are saying that if the Israelis behave like this, then they should be treated differently." Even dispassionate observers who downplay the Pollard affair—"silly" is a typical description—admit that it will probably be used by those in intelligence who do not like the "new, improved" U.S.-Israeli intelligence relationship.

The Israeli political and intelligence Establishment stands to lose the most if the relationship deteriorates. For that reason, a number of sources are convinced that Pollard's alleged activities were probably concocted by elements outside the mainstream of Israeli political society. One name mentioned in the Israeli press, Rafael Eitan, fits this description. Though a former adviser on terrorism to Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Eitan is viewed as a product of the extreme right in Israel. And it is on the extreme right where one finds those most distrustful of America's commitment to Israel. "They hate the feeling of dependence on the U.S.," says one sympathetic U.S. official.

Moreover, the Israeli Establishment has a well-deserved reputation for professionalism in Washington. Almost alone among Middle Easterners, the Israelis are viewed as key players. Most foreign diplomats, lost in the sea of conflicting institutions, overwhelmed by an open and free-wheeling political system and ignored by most of the city's power brokers, retreat into an irrelevant social whirl. Not the Israelis.

They have mastered the intricacies of Congress, the press and the special-interest groups. Working with the politically active and influential American Jewish community, they often set the standard for other embassies, particularly those from the Middle East.

The absurdity of resorting to covert actions when most doors are open is recognized even by the Israelis. "My

problem has always been a fear of drowning in information," said one bemused Israeli official.

Yet State Department officials already see signs that the Israeli Establishment is taking the matter seriously, moving to investigate charges and contain damage. (According to these officials, the Israelis must act quickly since U.S. law enforcement authorities have obtained the original purloined documents).

As a result, a number of U.S. officials and congressional sources believe the U.S.-Israeli relationship will weather this "crisis in confidence."

They believe the Israeli Establishment, like the American, may be cumbersome but, also like ours, is ultimately held accountable at home. □

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